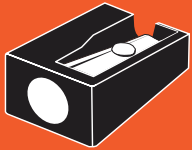
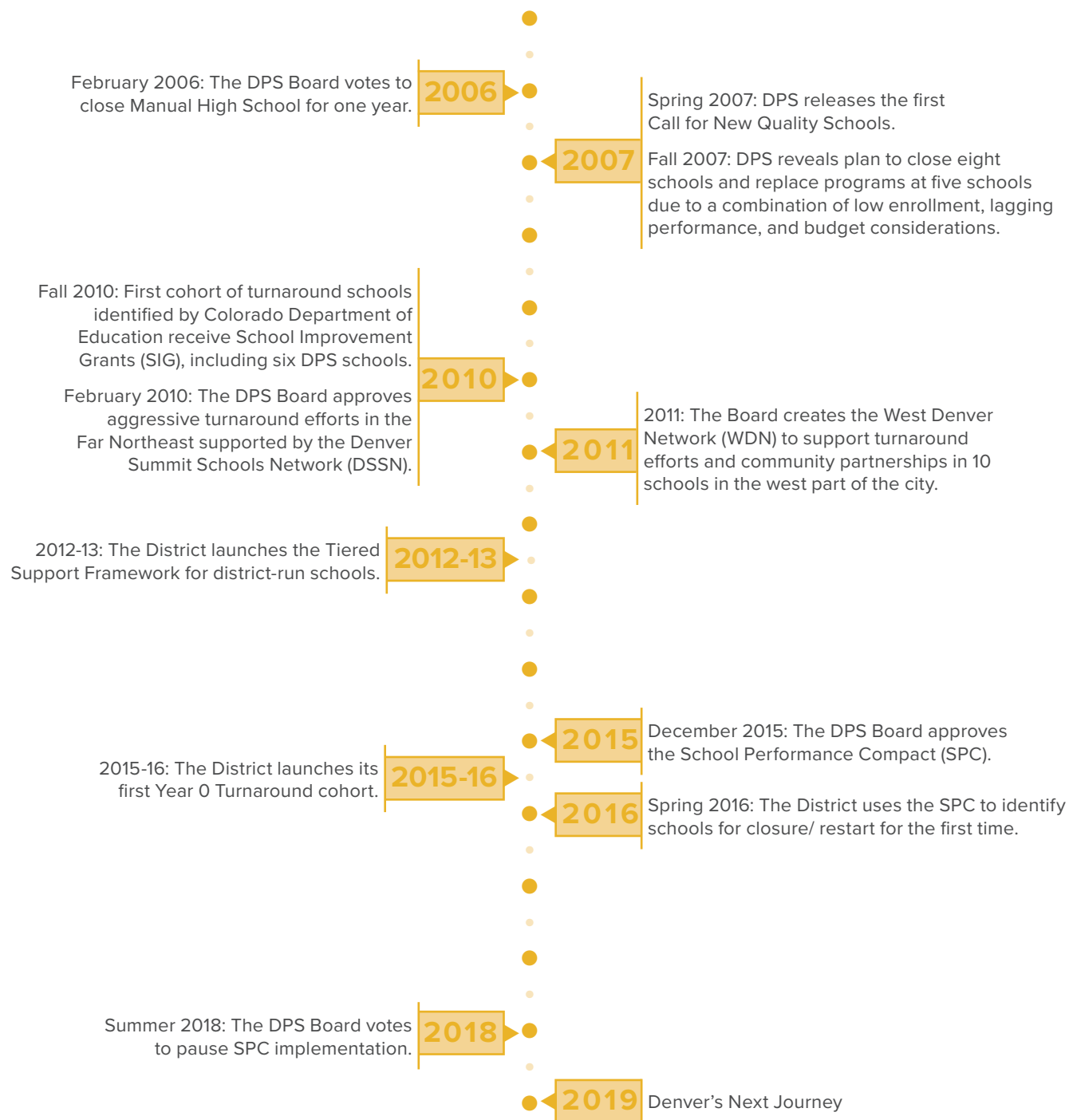


Denver's Next Journey: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT



A+
Colorado
SHARPENING
PUBLIC
EDUCATION



Denver's Next Journey: School Improvement

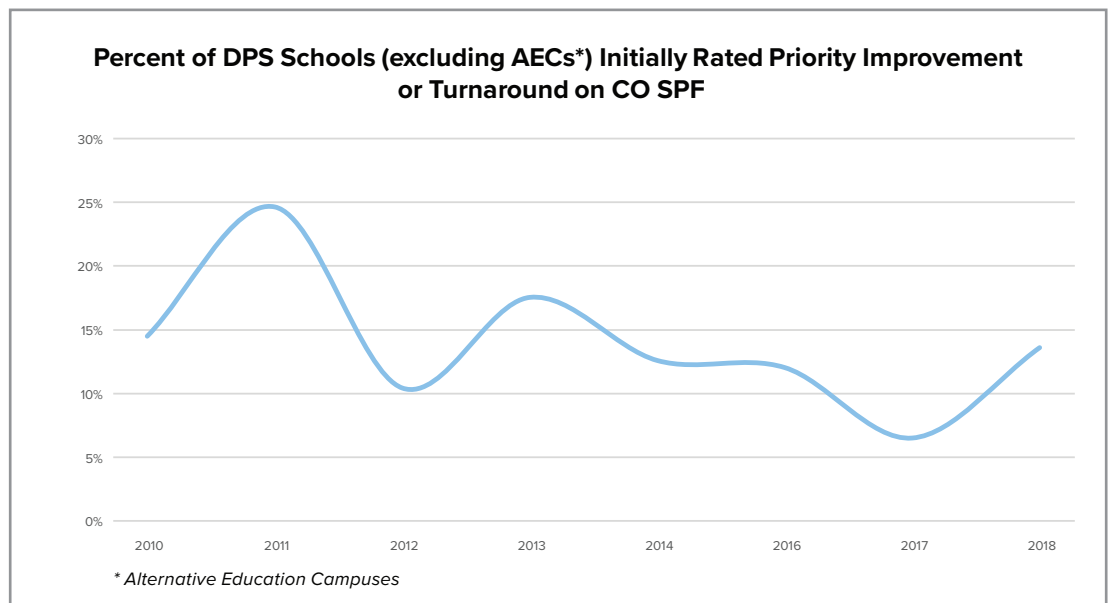
This is the second of a multi-part series of briefs that analyze some of Denver's big bets across the last decade to improve education for all students. For more content visit apluscolorado.org/denvers-next-journey

The Denver Plan 2020 sets an audacious goal: 80% of all students attend schools rated green or blue, the district's measure of quality academic outcomes. Yet for the past decade, Denver Public Schools has struggled to answer this question: How do we address the needs of students in our chronically underperforming schools? The purpose of this brief is to explore how the district has targeted resources and supports to improve learning in the schools with the lowest outcomes.

A+ Colorado has been at the front or behind the scenes in many of these efforts described below, including in the Far Northeast as a district partner and in Southwest Denver in an outside coalition. We worked directly with the district to consider innovative models like the Year 0 turnaround and have been critical when we believe the district has lost their stomach for tough decisions. We believe, not only despite, but because of our involvement, we ought to have a rich, fact-based community dialogue about the experience and outcomes of all turnaround initiatives. We must be honest about what has worked and what has not. As Denver takes our next journey to improve schools, we must all strive for collective honesty and accountability.

Just the Facts:

The percent of DPS schools that fall in lowest performance bucket statewide, declined through 2017 but increased in 2018.



This is complex work. In a district that has been a national model for education improvement, an enormous number of strategies and initiatives have been implemented to improve a district in which, seven short years ago, nearly a quarter of its schools were identified as amongst the lowest performing in the state.¹ In the years to follow, fewer Denver schools were amongst that low performing group. How did this happen?

It's complicated. It's difficult to parse out numerous variables to understand the direct impact of one initiative or another, or to track schools that continuously improved and those whose performance fluctuated around the cut point. What we attempt in this issue brief is to give a high-level accounting of district improvement efforts and an analysis of historical data. Of note, while we focus on district level improvements, these ran in parallel to and often leveraged federal and state policies of the time like No Child Left Behind (NCLB), School Improvement Grants (SIG), the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and the state accountability system.

Further, efforts to address low-performing schools disproportionately impact low-income communities and communities of color. Over the past decade, in the schools that have been impacted by a major turnaround intervention 93% of students identified as students of color and 88% qualified for free or reduced price lunch.²

To ensure a full picture, we spoke with current and former district staff, students, and school leaders, reviewed contemporaneous Board minutes, presentations, and news articles. Over the course of this review, three broad categories of initiatives emerged:

1. District-run interventions
2. New and autonomous schools
3. School closure and restart

First, let's return to a moment in the history of DPS that we believe marks a turning point in the district's approach to low-performing schools.

“I’d love to see the district wrestle with the unintended consequences of policies and practices that foster competition and lean more heavily on relationships, collaboration, and motivation as catalysts for improvement—especially in our lowest performing schools.”

—Brittany Erickson, former DPS employee

A New Era in Denver Public Schools

On a night in February 2006, the DPS School Board debates a plan to close Manual High School the following year and allow students to attend higher performing high schools throughout the city. The school would then reopen with 9th graders and a new and improved plan in 2007. At the time, a majority of Board members and district staff were hopeful that their bold action would result in better outcomes for students. The graduation rate at the school had dipped below 20%, according to a Board member. Enrollment at the school had fallen 47% in four years.^{3,4}

The minutes from this meeting document a fraught discussion. Board members at the time had deep roots in the Manual community—Board member Bruce Hoyt was himself a Manual alum and co-founded the Friends of Manual nonprofit. Superintendent Bennet spoke from the dais after the Board completed their discussion. “Tonight is not the end of Manual,” he said. “It is the beginning of a sustained, relentless, difficult, painful effort to rebuild our secondary schools in this district.” After an unsuccessful attempt to delay the vote by Board member Jill Conrad, the motion passed six to one, with Conrad’s the only nay vote. The meeting adjourned at 8:37pm.

With the benefit of hindsight, present-day readers know the continued struggles of one of the city’s most historic high schools. When the school reopened in 2007, Manual entered a prolonged period of churn—new principals, new models, new initiatives, none lasting more than a few years. Between 2015-2018, the district spent an additional \$3 million on interventions and supports for the roughly 300 student school.⁵ Manual is currently on Year 5 of the state’s accountability clock and could face state intervention with one more year of low performance.

The district continues to struggle to keep the promise Michael Bennet made in February 2006. But from a historical perspective, the attempt to address chronic underperformance with dramatic, proactive interventions marked a shift in strategy for the district. And while the promise has not yet been kept at Manual, other parts of the city, and other schools, have seen better outcomes. Now in retrospect we can try to answer: What lessons have been learned? What strategies changed and what remained? How have outcomes improved, and for which students? How did the district continue to address the needs of students in its lowest performing schools? And how have students and families been brought along (or not) through these changes?

“The closing of schools has been very upsetting. Why can’t the district support schools more instead of constantly changing up the portfolio? Lets find the models that work and then give kids across the entire district access by pushing in whats working instead of closing down what isn’t working.”

– Anna, Northwest Denver Parent.

District-run interventions

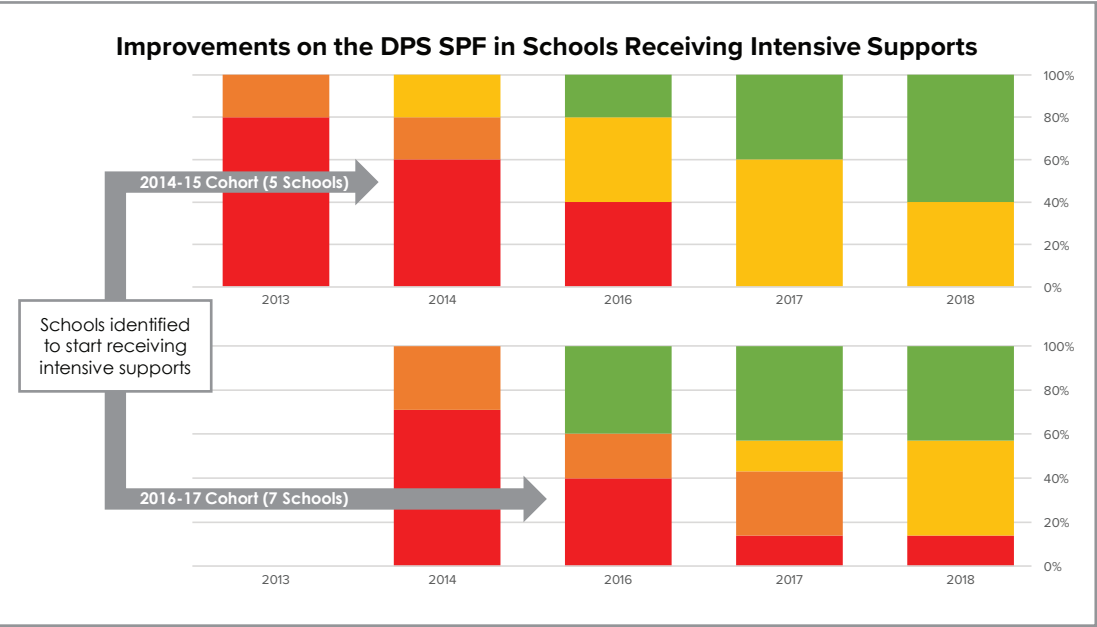
Since 2012, school interventions for low-performing schools have been codified by district staff in the form of the Tiered Support Framework (TSF). The stated purpose of the TSF is to establish conditions for success, provide intensive supports aligned to school needs, and evaluate and improve instruction and programming.⁶

Over the years, the TSF has included three levels. **Universal supports** are available to all schools—professional development, curriculum support, funding, etc. **Strategic supports** include targeted school improvement planning, additional school-based supports for teachers and school leaders, and additional funding. **Intensive/turnaround supports**, the highest level, includes significant funding, partnership with the district, and can include school program redesign.

Evidence shows the TSF, and specifically, concentrated support in intensive-tier schools, is paying dividends. According to a 2018 analysis by the Center for American Progress, students in schools receiving strategic or intensive supports by the district showed higher growth than their peers across the state.⁷ And while gaps persist between subgroups at TSF-designated schools, Hispanic and Latino students and students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch made more academic progress than their peers throughout the state.

Additionally, when looking at progress in schools receiving intensive supports, there is a clear trend of improved ratings on the district's School Performance Framework.

Just the Facts:
Schools receiving intensive supports have seen improvement.



The district continues to increase supports through the TSF. Recently DPS moved to provide funding for intensive support schools from three years to five years, ensuring longer term support for schools even as they improve.

In addition to the TSF strategies described above, the district also tried something new with four of its lowest-performing schools: Year 0 Redesign. In June 2015, the district TSF team identified 4 schools—three in the Southwest—to undergo a dramatic and unprecedented turnaround effort. Each of these schools—Schmitt, Goldrick, Valverde (Harrington, the fourth school in this cohort, is in the Near Northeast region)—were on the state’s turnaround clock by 2014. The new plan included a robust suite of supports for the school and school leaders:

- Hire a “Year 0” principal to spend one school year planning and implementing a redesigned model the following year.

- Hire and place an interim school leader to oversee the school during Year 0 while the “Year 0” leader led a school design process rooted in community partnership.
- Invest in comprehensive supports and professional development for the Year 0 principal, including an instructional superintendent focused on developing turnaround competencies, a dedicated project manager to support school design work, dedicated Family and Community Engagement staff members, and trips to visit high-performing schools nationwide.

By most measures, this investment has paid off. After two years with the Year 0 leader in place, every Year 0 school is off the state turnaround clock, though the International Academy of Denver at Harrington slipped on the state and district 2018 ratings, and Schmitt Elementary slipped on the state 2018 ratings.

Just the Facts:
Early results from schools in the Year Zero turnaround cohort show some improvement.

Improved DPS SPF Ratings in “Year Zero” Turnaround Schools						
SCHOOL NAME	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
				Interim Leader and School Design Process by Y0 Leader	1st Year with Y0 Leader and Redesign in Place	
Goldrick Elementary	Accredited on Watch	Accredited on Priority Watch	No SPF	Meets Expectations	Meets Expectations	Meets Expectations
International Academy of Denver at Harrington	Accredited on Watch	Accredited on Probation		Accredited on Probation	Meets Expectations	Accredited on Watch
Schmitt Elementary	Accredited on Watch	Accredited on Probation		Accredited on Priority Watch	Meets Expectations	Meets Expectations
Valverde Elementary	Accredited on Priority Watch	Accredited on Probation		Accredited on Probation	Accredited on Watch	Accredited on Watch
*Valverde was not given an interim principal.						

New and Autonomous Schools

Colorado’s charter law has been on the books since 1993, ushering in a new era of independently run, publicly funded schools that have performance contracts with the school district. In 2000, the first charters opened in DPS. In 2002, the first charter management organization (CMO) opened a school in DPS with KIPP Sunshine Peak Academy. By 2006, familiar names like DSST and STRIVE Prep (then West Denver Prep) had schools open in DPS.

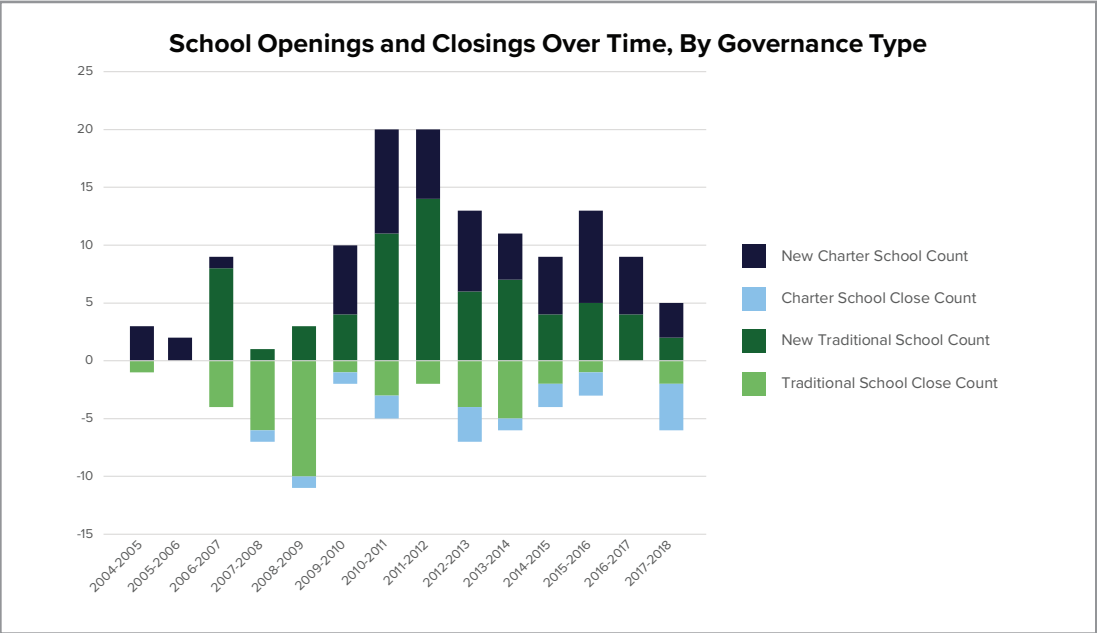
Between 2010 and 2015, the district grew by 13%—adding over 12,000 additional students and they needed new schools to keep up with this demand.⁹

But new schools served another important purpose in DPS—offering high-quality schools as additional

options or as replacements to low-performing schools. In 2007, DPS issued its first “Call for New Quality Schools” to request new school applications from new district-run and charter schools in the state and around the country.

As a Board presentation by district staff dated February 16, 2010 states, “Our strategy must be a both/and strategy – both focusing on improving our existing schools using data and proven school improvement approaches and welcoming high-performing new options.”¹⁰ The “Call” quickly came to serve a dual purpose: to help the district keep up with the increased demand of a growing district and request applications to offer new or replacement seats in areas with chronically underperforming schools.

Just the Facts:
DPS has opened and closed many schools across governance types.



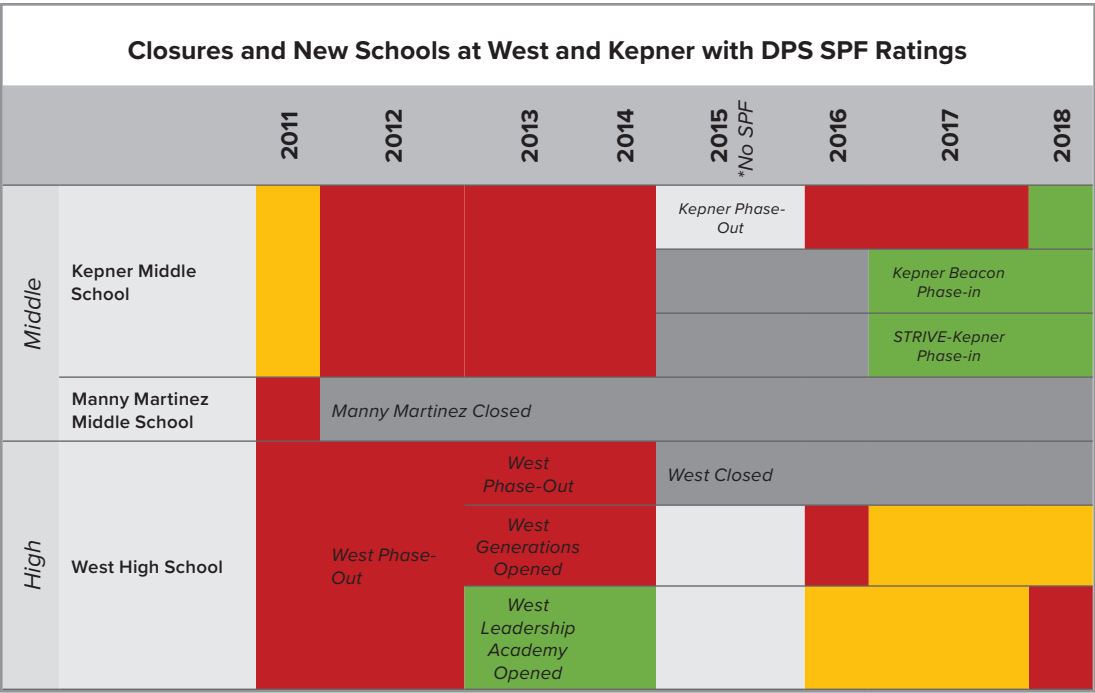
Just the Facts:

Schools were closed and replaced by both district run and charter schools in Montbello and in west Denver with mixed results.

The Far Northeast (FNE) turnaround efforts exemplify the district's push to address chronically underperforming schools by closing schools and opening new, intentionally-designed schools. These new schools were a mix of district-run schools, often opening with innovation waivers that enabled the implementation of programs like extended day, and charter schools. By and large the district-run schools all ended up using a similar model based on a partnership with Blueprint schools under the coordination of the Denver Summit Schools Network (DSSN).

On November 18, 2010, the DPS Board voted to implement an aggressive turnaround strategy in the FNE involving the closure of four schools, the redesign of two.¹¹ 11 months later the district would describe an "urgent need" for additional, high-performing seats at every grade level in the FNE in the 2011 Call for New Quality Schools.¹² This would result in the opening of eleven new schools over the next two years.

Closures and New Schools in Montbello with DPS SPF Ratings												
		2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015 *No SPF	2016	2017	2018
Elementary	Ford Elementary					Ford Phase-Out						
						DCIS Ford Phase In						
	John H. Amesse Elementary										Identified for Restart	Year 0 for partnership in Montbello Children's Zone
	McGlone Elementary										McGlone MS Expansion	
	Oakland Elementary					Oakland Phase Out						
Middle						SOAR at Oakland Phase In						
									Oakland Re-open			
	Noel Middle School					Noel Phase Out						
						DCIS Montbello MS Phase In						
						KIPP Montbello Phase In						
High						Noel Community Arts School Phase In						
							STRIVE Montbello					
	Montbello High School					Montbello Phase Out						
						Collegiate Prep Phase In						
						DCIS Montbello HS Phase In						
						High Tech Early College Phase In						



The Board’s decision to close Noel Middle School and Montbello High School were particularly controversial and painful. These schools, while some of the district’s lowest performing, were fixtures in the community. Though some community members called for changes, there were also many vocal critics. Members of the community lost their jobs, the DSSN was critiqued for not delivering on promises of regular community engagement, and for many the shared campus has presented real issues. Moving from a comprehensive middle and high school that was an anchor in the community to a system of fragmented student and family educational experiences has been an ongoing challenge DPS has struggled to address.

In the 8 years since the FNE turnaround began, results are mixed. In 2018 eight schools in Montbello and Green Valley Ranch are on the state’s turnaround clock. Students in the Far Northeast today have relatively better access to high quality seats than students did before the region-wide turnaround and expansion. Back in 2010 when the Board announced its plans in Montbello only 24% of students in FNE schools were in Green or Blue-rated schools. In 2018, 42% of students are in high-quality seats, compared to 44% district-wide. However this falls very short of the promises that many families were offered at the start of the turnaround.

The district pursued a similar strategy in west and southwest Denver, where the district opened 26 new schools from 2010 to 2018, including as replacements for closed schools. In June 2011 the School Board voted to phase out Manny Martinez Middle School and West High School, replacing the schools with two 6th-12th grade programs: West Generations and West Leadership Academy. While leadership has remained stable at West Leadership Academy, the experience at West Generations has been fraught with instability and changes since the initial wholesale turnaround was implemented in 2012. Given continued low performance at West Generations, DPS moved away from the generations model beginning in 2015, and continues to serve students through West Early College, receiving an official designation from the state as an Early College in fall 2017.¹³

Kepner Middle School began phasing out in 2014-15 and two schools, selected by the Kepner Thought Partner Group of parents and community members, were phased-in to serve students. In 2016 Kepner Beacon, an innovation school that replicates the Grant Beacon model through a year 0 process, and STRIVE-Kepner, a charter school, opened.

In general, however, new schools have been a boon to the district. On average, new schools opened since 2010 have interrupted trends of chronic low performance. In a world of booming enrollment, the district's new school strategy both resolved population growth and academic growth needs. However, in our current moment of declining enrollment, the ability to lead with a new school strategy is limited and community members are demanding a focus on improving district-run neighborhood schools.

School Closure and Restart

In October 2007, Supt. Michael Bennet stood in front of an audience at the Tivoli Student Union to announce the closing of 8 district-run schools in an effort to save the district about \$3.5 million each year. Each school was under-enrolled; according to district officials at the time, only 70% of district space was being utilized. With few exceptions, economic and demographic realities motivated school closure, not turnaround.

In a few short years, however, as the tide of enrollment turned, the district could make more strategic decisions about which schools to close, focusing on the district's lowest performing schools.

There has always been a clear process for closing low-performing charter schools, as each school maintains a performance contract with the DPS Board. If charters are found in breach of contract and the school is unable to increase academic outcomes, the school will be phased out or closed. The FNE, for example, has seen its share of charters closed for poor performance: Northeast Academy (2013), SOAR Oakland (2014), Sims-Fayola (2015). In each of these cases, the charter boards voluntarily surrendered their charters to the district. Alternatively, some low-performing charters are opting to voluntarily surrender their charters to higher-performing networks with other charter applications the DPS Board has already approved. This was the case for Pioneer Charter School, where student achievement was in the first percentile in English Language Arts and the fifth percentile in Math, when they transitioned

the elementary school to University Prep. In 2017, outcomes for those students rose to the 43rd percentile for ELA and the 70th percentile for math.

In December 2015, the DPS Board passed a policy that outlined the process for closing or restarting all types of schools (charter, district, innovation) in an attempt to be objective in an emotionally painful process. The School Performance Compact (SPC) established a “transparent and consistent policy to identify and designate for restart or closure the most persistently low-performing schools.”¹⁴

In anticipation for the process, the district for the first time ever built capacity to be able to “apply” and “compete” for the restart opportunities. Previously, the district would assign restart schools using a process that was not transparent. Under the SPC, the district would be able to submit and propose new school options alongside potential other charter options.

In 2016 John Amesse, Greenlee, and Gilpin elementary schools were identified under the new policy. Amesse and Greenlee were selected for restart starting with a year 0 in 2017, and the district therefore actively sought new or replicating schools to apply to take over and serve the same students. Two district-run applications were the eventual winners in a months-long review process that involved, similar to the process at Kepner the previous year, a Community Review Board of parents and community members.

At Gilpin, low academic outcomes coupled with low enrollment led the Board to controversially vote for closure rather than restart at the end of 2016. At the time, about 10% of the school’s 200 students were reading on grade level, and the average student was making less progress than 65% of their peers across the state. Significant backlash against this decision coupled with long-simmering anger over previous closures at Manual and Montbello (amongst others), reflects a growing discontent over DPS strategies related to school closure.

The Board decided to pause the “bright line” aspect School Performance Compact in June of 2018 that triggered restart or closure, wanting to move toward a more comprehensive analysis of school quality, and a process for communities to engage in decisions about school closure or restart. In 2018 the Board did not vote to close or, restart any schools, instead allowing schools below a certain threshold of performance to complete an improvement plan that is reviewed by district staff and a Community Review Board. No schools were closed in 2018, despite seven schools being on Year 3 or more of the state’s accountability clock. The resulting lack of a clear process at the district for understanding when schools might be closed, or when the district might have a more aggressive intervention in a district-run school has not entirely prevented the district from addressing some low-performing schools, such as Lake in the past year. However, there are many more schools that require urgent action and without the policy or political will, it is unclear what will drive these changes.

Looking to the Past, Present, and Future

The district has come a long way since Manual High School reopened in 2007. The district has invested in deep systems to support schools when students are struggling academically. It has tried to make interventions clearer and more predictable. And the district deployed a number of strategies to try and improve schools. Yet, the impacts of turnaround work have been decidedly mixed. While some school communities have seen positive change and have been supported and empowered to create the schools they want for their students, many still see academic outcomes that are far too low, and many school communities have been fragmented. Mistrust has compounded, making it ever

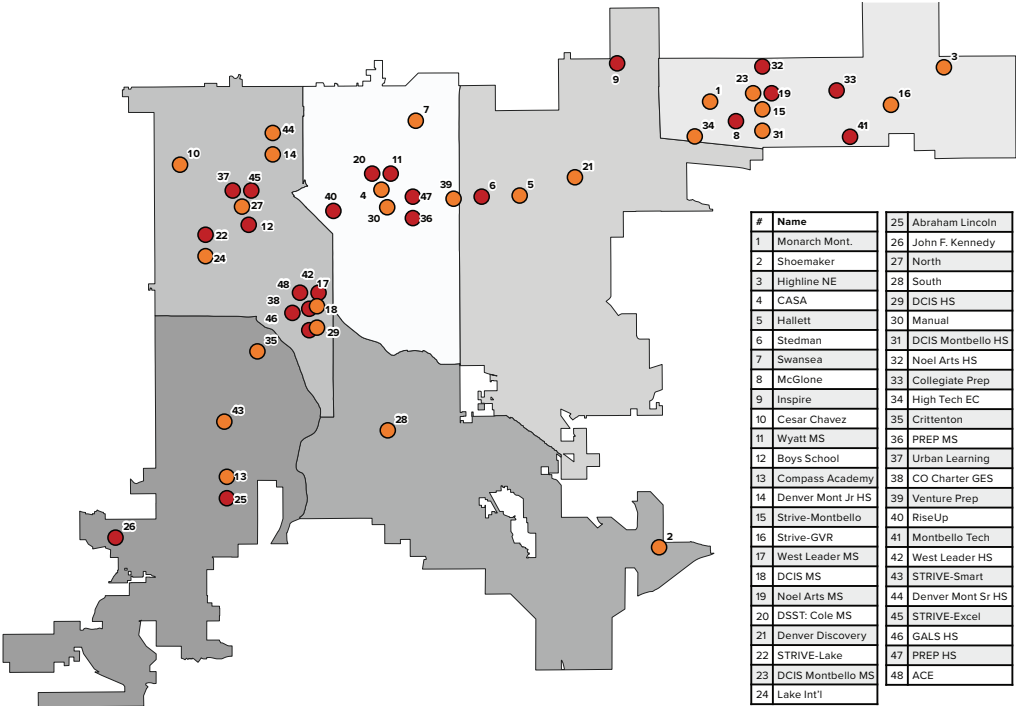
more difficult to do this difficult and complex work. Furthermore, it seems as if these best practices like community-driven redesign that have emerged from this decade of learning are not being utilized with urgency.

As the district enters its next journey, there are far too many students in schools where improvement is urgent.

We encourage district, school, and community leaders to continue to invest in our highest need schools. We hope this work is done with an eye to the historical context described in this brief, but many key questions remain.

Schools Rated Red or Orange on the 2018 DPS SPF

Just the Facts:
17,442 students attend the nearly 50 schools in Denver that received the district's two lowest performance ratings in 2018.



Essential Questions for the Next Journey

- How can the district undertake turnaround and improvement efforts in partnership with communities?
- How can the district remain open to new, high-quality school models, either district-run or charter operated, while replicating models with a track record of success, particularly when many neighborhoods and schools are experiencing declining enrollment?
- Is DPS appropriately identifying the schools most in need of extra support and improvement? What interventions is the district supporting when schools start to show declines in academic outcomes or school culture? How are “early warnings” heeded and supported?
- How can the District build high quality pipelines of leaders and teachers ready to take on the challenges of working in turnaround schools?

“In a broad sense, school turnaround is best understood as a political maneuver that pricks our public conscience about failing other people’s children—school policy makers understand that, and often can be seen as heroes in a story of their own making. While data are mixed about the efficacy of school turnaround, it is not mixed about the target: scores produced by children (often of color) in schools with limited resources. So reliable analysis of using turnaround as a method to improve education can only begin with the interrogation of this target, an interrogation that is led by children, educators, family members, community members, and does not rely solely on the advice of business experts whose insights are informed by corporate principles of productivity. To be sure, if we flipped the model, and required an education that emphasized the development of humans (rather than the production of scores), of thinkers and problem solvers (rather than performers), and we employed measures to this end, then we’d better understand when a school needed prompt and urgent intervention.”

– Antwan Jefferson, Ph.D., CCOC Chair, SEHD, University of Colorado Denver

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Chris DeWitt for his research and support in compiling this report.

We are grateful for the thought-partnership of former and current DPS staff and school leaders who provided feedback and background for this report including Joe Amundsen. Thank you to Matt Baker for technical support.

Most importantly we are grateful to the educators, who put in the hard work to improve schools, and to the communities, families, and students who continue to push and work with schools to ensure every student receives an excellent education.

Endnotes

- 1 Based on an A+ analysis of data from the Colorado Department of Education. Starting in 2010, annually the CDE calculates a School Performance Framework, identifying schools that are "Priority Improvement" and "Turnaround." Each year approximately 7% of schools across the state receive these two ratings, indicating they have the lowest academic outcomes as calculated by the SPF. We use the state SPF instead of DPS' SPF as it has been far more stable over time. DPS often requests the department assign one of these two ratings to additional schools that ranked lower on the district's own SPF, which has often set a higher bar for school performance than the state.
- 2 A+ analysis based on public enrollment data and DPS tracking of turnaround interventions
- 3 Denver Public Schools Board of Education. (2006, February). *Board Minutes*.
- 4 Meyer, J. P. (2016, May 07). *High school interrupted for Manual students*. Retrieved from <https://www.denverpost.com/2009/05/23/high-school-interrupted-for-manual-students/>
- 5 Asmar, M. (2018, September 11). *After another low rating, Denver's Manual High could face state intervention*. Retrieved from <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2018/09/10/after-another-low-rating-denvers-manual-high-could-face-state-intervention/>
- 6 Denver Public Schools. (2014, December 4). *Turnaround and Intensive Tier School Supports 2014-2015*. [https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/9RSSX381AE15/\\$file/Tiered Supports BOE recommendations Dec 2014.pdf](https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/9RSSX381AE15/$file/Tiered%20Supports%20BOE%20recommendations%20Dec%202014.pdf).
- 7 Batel, S. (2018, November 15). *Improving All Schools*. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2018/11/15/459898/improving-all-schools/>
- 8 Schools start to receive supports at the beginning of a school year, before SPF results are released in the fall. The following fall is indicative of performance after the school has received a year of intensive supports. For example, schools in the 2016-17 cohort were identified in the summer of 2016, before the 2016 SPF was released. The 2017 is the first SPF to reflect results after those schools were receiving intensive supports.
- 9 Denver Public Schools. (2018, Fall). *Strategic Regional Analysis*. https://www.dpsk12.org/wp-content/uploads/Denver_Public_Schools_Strategic_Regional_Analysis_2018.pdf.
- 10 Denver Public Schools. (2010, February 10). *Continuous Improvement in Denver Public Schools: Success Takes Courage and Commitment*. [https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/82R2F401E948/\\$file/2-16-10TurnaroundPres-forBoE-FINAL-2.pdf](https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/82R2F401E948/$file/2-16-10TurnaroundPres-forBoE-FINAL-2.pdf).
- 11 Denver Public Schools Board of Education. (2010, November 18). *Resolution Approving Far Northeast Denver Turnaround*.
- 12 Denver Public Schools Office of School Reform and Innovation. (2011, January 12). *Call for Quality Schools to Open in 2012-2013*. [https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/8D4UT378C868/\\$file/5.02 - Call for Quality Schools _Draft.pdf](https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/8D4UT378C868/$file/5.02%20Call%20for%20Quality%20Schools%20Draft.pdf).
- 13 West Early College. (2017, December). *West Early College Innovation School Application*. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1HjOY5KWiNGyjQK8tGcMaaleZj_nND0X/view.
- 14 Denver Public Schools. (2015, December 17). *School Performance Compact: Board of Education Update*. [https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/A5AUMQ7B9217/\\$file/12_17 School Performance Compact Board Slides Final.pdf](https://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/A5AUMQ7B9217/$file/12_17%20School%20Performance%20Compact%20Board%20Slides%20Final.pdf).



ABOUT A+ COLORADO

The mission of A+ Colorado is to sharpen public education by building public will and advocating for the changes necessary to dramatically increase student achievement in schools and districts in Colorado. We are an independent, nonpartisan 501(c)(3) organization working to bring the power of data and research to challenge ourselves, educators and policymakers to rethink public education.